DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 001 RC 022 712

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TITLE When the School Is the Community: A Case Study of Fourche Valley School, Briggsville, Arkansas.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 26p.; In: "Small High Schools That Flourish: Rural Context, Case Studies, and Resources"; see RC 022 708.
AVAILABLE FROM AEL, Inc., P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348 ($20/book). Tel: 800-624-9120 (Toll Free); e-mail: aelinfo@ael.org.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Community Involvement; Community Schools; Economically Disadvantaged; *Educational Environment; Geographic Isolation; High Schools; Institutional Survival; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; *Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS Community Viability; Unit Schools

ABSTRACT

Fourche Valley School District in central Arkansas has a single K-12 school serving 157 students. Surrounded by the Ouachita National Forest, Fourche Valley is unusually isolated and lacking in economic opportunity, leading to "low aspirations" among students who desire to remain in the area. Nevertheless, the school is thriving in the face of adversity and serves as the true center of the community in the absence of any local governing bodies or civic organizations. Interviews and focus groups with administrators, high school teachers, parents, students, and other community members revealed various signs of school success and progress: a positive school climate characterized by friendliness and caring; a beautifully maintained school facility; access to technology and distance education partnerships with other small districts; recent improvements in curriculum and instruction and an emphasis on relevance in curriculum; uncommon professional development strategies; extensive engagement of community adults in school activities; strong leadership by the superintendent, principal, and school board president; a long-term partnership with Arkansas Tech University; and addition of new talented teachers following state-mandated pay raises. Despite these characteristics, the school's survival ultimately depends on the economic viability of the valley and the ability of the district to hold off state advocates of consolidation. (SV)

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CHAPTER 7

When the School Is the Community: A Case Study of Fourche Valley School, Briggsville, Arkansas

PATRICIA DEMLER HADDEN

As a researcher for the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, I visited Fourche Valley School District (FVSD) in March of 1998. During a two-day visit, I interviewed approximately 30 people including the school principal, high school teachers, and other staff members; the district superintendent; the school board president; students; parents; other community members; and a professor from Arkansas Tech University (ATU) who had been working with the Fourche Valley school on curriculum development and the establishment of a literacy lab for adults.

The interviews were conducted both individually and in focus groups of four to five people. While all groups provided input, I conducted more in-depth interviews with district board president Larry Aikman and the aforementioned professor. The extra attention given to these interviews was partly due to the fact that school was in session and these persons could spend more time with me than school staff and students, and partly because they each exhibited intense interest in the Fourche Valley School and its constituents. My "walking interview" with the school's principal was, however, another particularly fruitful source of information.

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Fourche Valley School District is located in the Ouachita Mountains in central Arkansas. The 266-square-mile area served by the school district is home to about 950 people who live in eight small towns and settlements. None of the communities is incorporated, and the school district is the only public service agency in the area. Except for a volunteer fire fighters' cooperative, the school is the only identifiable and significant connection among the separate communities in Fourche Valley. The federal government estimates that the population in the area has grown less than three percent since the 1990 census.

This is a very small school, with 157 students for all grades K-12. Although many observers might claim that schools with enrollments per grade approaching 100 students could readily provide appropriate curriculums for their students, most educators and policymakers would doubt the ability of a school this small—with seven to 10 students per grade—to do so. I found a vibrant, inviting school that is nonetheless already considered successful by its constituents. These constituents believe the school, given the opportunity to survive, can continue to prove itself on anyone's measures.

I must remind readers that I make these observations based on a short visit and a limited number of interviews, set up, for the most part, by the school's superintendent, Jack O'Reilly. For a more comprehensive study, I would have investigated further certain issues raised in these interviews. For this study, however, the mission was to locate a small rural high school that is considered by fellow educators to be thriving in the face of adversity and to visit the school in an attempt to understand that reputation.

A Flourishing School in a Fragile Community

As expected, I found what can be considered a good school, measured against many criteria. What was unexpected was the realization that the school likely will not be sustainable; not for want of success, but because of adverse economic circumstances in the surrounding area. There are few jobs locally, and the jobs that exist pay meager wages. Any hope for organized, local economic development lies with the county government or the school, for the school serves as the community center. Among the eight small communities served by the FVSD, I found no governing bodies, no strong presence of churches,

and no civic organizations. Other than school events, funerals were the *only* events mentioned by the people interviewed as examples of how community members come together and support each other.

As the center of the community, the school does much of what a community governing body would be expected to do. At present, FVSD has leaders who are able to elicit the trust required to mobilize resources, plan, and to help their constituents broaden their sense of community. In turn, the leaders are blessed with local citizens who trust and respect their leadership and are willing to lend their talents and donate other resources to local projects.

It is important, I think, that the leaders are community insiders. At the same time, however, they bring wider awareness and certain skills and strengths gained from previously living outside the community. The school board president, Larry Aikman, is a native of the area who returned after a 30-year career in the military. The school principal, Cecilia Rice, is Aikman's daughter, whom (as he tells it) he "cajoled" into moving back to the area to take on the principalship. The school's superintendent, a Detroit native and former principal of an urban school, is married to a native of the area who wanted to return to her roots. Urban dwellers (or urban and suburban readers) may judge the closeness of these ties as suspicious or somehow objectionable, but I saw strength and authentic interest in developing a school program that serves its constituents well. Local rural schools, in fact, inevitably mirror their environment, and, according to many rural writers, the familiar bureaucratic models of schooling may be poorly suited to rural places.

I was impressed with what an excellent model for participation this school offers, including widespread sharing, community pride, reciprocal trust, caring, and respect. The overriding problems, though, are the weak local economy, the low literacy level of area adults, and the apparent lack of hope or optimism that things can be better, even within the specific province of education.

The Challenges: Isolation, Lack of Economic Opportunity, Low Aspirations

Fourche Valley is surrounded by the Ouachita National Forest, one of the largest national forests in the nation. The Arkansas Department of Education has designated the district "super-isolated." But the com-

munities served by the FVSD are separated more by lack of good roads than by distance. From the town of Briggsville, where the school is located, the nearest town with a full range of services is Russellville (population 25,000), located 40 miles away. This distance might be a reasonable commute in some places, but these are long miles of two-lane roads over a mountain ridge (easily located on maps by the road's tortuous curves).

Community members certainly view themselves as isolated. A parent of a second-grade student described her difficulty adjusting to the isolation when she first moved to Fourche Valley. "It was different for me because everything is so far away, but now I wouldn't leave," she said. "My sister would live here, but there are no jobs."

There are many good reasons to want to live in the area and to want family and loved ones to stay. Fourche Valley has a mild climate and is incredibly beautiful and virtually pristine. The surrounding countryside is mountainous and heavily forested. Since the national forest surrounds the valley, there is little worry that the area will lose its natural beauty to over-development. The valley's comparative isolation eventually could be remedied by improving the roadways. Possibly, telecommunications could offer opportunities for creating jobs, potentially making the valley a desirable home for outsiders sometime in the future.

Historical Context

Until the late 1800s, the Ouachita Mountain region was very sparsely populated. American Indians and a few settlers engaged in subsistence farming on the rich bottomlands along rivers and streams. When the interstate railway system reached the Ouachitas, farmers began to grow cash crops, and more people moved into the area. There was a region-wide boom in lumbering beginning in the 1880s, when speculators began to claim land from the public domain. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt set aside much of the remaining public land as a national forest. The U.S. Forest Service set up ranger outposts, built roads and a telephone system, fought forest fires, and attempted to control timber stealing. The area continued to boom in the wake of continued intensive logging until the depression of the 1930s, when bankrupt farmers and lumber company owners sold large tracts of land

to the Dierks family, the International Paper Company, and the U.S. Forest Service.

Economic activity has never returned to the level experienced during the early part of the twentieth century. Land ownership has been stable since shortly after World War II. Today, other than a propertied few, most residents own small tracts of land with small houses or mobile homes on them. Nearly everyone farms for personal consumption.

Although residents proudly view themselves as independent, I detected tension between this pride and the constraints of self-sufficiency. That is, the Fourche Valley people exhibited a degree of powerlessness similar to that described by Gaventa. As one member described the situation, "I think the people would love to make more money. We have strong community. But the mentality of the average [Valley] person is more independent than the average citizen, which is one reason he's out here. He likes his little house on his land, likes to have his gun, go fishing. But if an industry would come in here that would pay higher paying jobs, people would do flip-flops [presumably for joy]." The valley's inhabitants enjoy unparalleled scenic beauty, rich agricultural lands along rivers and streams in the area, and valuable timber and stone resources, but the majority of them live at a subsistence level.

Today, most adults either work in the poultry, swine, or beef processing factories, or they drive the long 40 miles to Russellville to work. Income levels from paid employment are generally low. Although school records indicate that just 13 percent of the residents live in poverty, many families clearly live very close to the poverty line, and approximately 55 percent of the district students receive subsidized meals. Census data for 1990 showed that the school district residents' median household income was almost 20 percent less than the median for the state and over 40 percent less than the national median household income. Though incomes are very modest, income distribution appears more equal here than in many U.S. communities. According to the school district's superintendent, Jack O'Reilly, however, community members' expectations of significant improvements in their economic welfare have diminished in recent years. New federal restrictions on access roads in national forests raise additional fears (that is, fears of job loss) about impacts on an already tenuous forest economy.

Over half of the surrounding county's income is derived from the manufacturing and processing of food and related products. County data show employment in services is increasing faster than any other sector, although this employment still represents a much smaller proportion of the total than does manufacturing.

The adult literacy rate is among the lowest in the nation. The Arkansas Department of Education ranks the education level of adults in the area in the lowest 10 percent in the state, and fewer than two percent of adults have college degrees. The area's only sources of local news are the Yell County weekly newspaper and the school newspaper. All residents interviewed, though, expressed satisfaction with their access to information. Of the newspaper one person said, "If we want to communicate to the people, the county paper is good." Community members also post fliers in the local stores and post office.

Despite the challenged economic status of Fourche Valley, community members, including the elders, youth, school staff, and other residents, *consistently* affirmed their blessings. Adults interviewed spoke of the beauty of the area, the lack of political strife, strong community connections, safety, and freedom from violence. Of all the attributes mentioned, the feeling of safety appeared to be foremost in the minds of many community members.

The young people in the communities repeated themes expressed by the adults—that is, a generally very positive image of their community. They "like the people" and emphasize how fortunate they are that the valley is a safe place. I asked a group of three girls to describe their communities for me. They all agreed that the community is so small that everyone knows everyone else. One said,

> You always know if something is going on. You're always welcome at people's houses because everyone's friends. There's not a big drug problem. There are some drugs like everywhere, but we don't have a big problem like they have in some places. We have zero gangs. We have no racism.

Another observed,

> We never have to worry about getting shot. We can walk down the street without worrying about being picked up. We're safe. We don't even have to lock our doors.

The high school students who took part in our group interviews seemed to view their blessings with unusual clarity despite understandable ambivalence about wanting to leave the area to pursue educational objectives (and other dreams and ambitions) and wanting to stay after graduation.

Fourche Valley School

One hundred fifty-seven students, 14 teachers, three instructional aides, five classified employees, a principal, and a superintendent make up the human resources of this tiny, geographically isolated school district. Most daily school bus routes cover more dirt forest roads than paved county roads.

The U.S. Department of Education's School District Data Book (based on 1990 census data) reports the school district's ethnicity as 100 percent Anglo, but school staff interviewed spoke about increasing numbers of Hispanic children who are coming to the area because their parents are working in the chicken factories. There is a trailer park in one of the small communities, and housing is a critical problem in the entire area. The Hispanic families move into the trailer park and their children attend school in FVSD until the families can move closer to the chicken factories, which are situated in another school district.

FVSD operates a single campus that serves first through twelfth grade. Although this study focused on the high school grades, a single building, headed by one principal, houses all grades. The physical plant consists of this main classroom building (modest but very attractive and inviting), a small frame building that houses the kindergarten and a Title I program, a large agriculture and science learning center, a 1940s-era woodpillared gym, and an antiquated cafeteria. The school facility is beautifully maintained. In front of the school is a fenced-in children's playscape built by community members. At the entrance of the school is a flower bed with blooming daffodils planted to spell out "FVSD." A community resident who is an expert gardener helped a group of students plant the bulbs.

The low socioeconomic status of most residents combined with the presence of the national forest gives the district a meager tax base. Thus, teacher salaries have been historically low compared to both the state average and to salaries in similarly small school districts nationally and within the state of Arkansas.

Considering adverse conditions such as widely shared poverty and low literacy rates, the Fourche Valley School performs better than might be expected. Traditional measures of student achievement such as test scores and school completion rates rank at about the median for the state (and *far above* the rank of adult literacy in the valley). In the previous few years, there had been minor increases in test scores. Yet, at the time of my visit, the school was going through significant changes and appeared to be operating in a mode of continuous improvement that would likely result in further improvement in the current level of student performance.

The Charter School Effort

The residents of Fourche Valley value what they have. They are especially involved in and appreciative of their school, and they have sustained this loyalty to it over time and in many ways. One significant rallying point was the school and community effort to become a charter school.

Like most very small school districts, Fourche Valley School District struggles to meet the many state standards in order to avoid dissolution and consolidation. Superintendent Jack O'Reilly saw charter school status as a way to improve school instructional services while simultaneously satisfying the state department of education's quality requirements. He introduced the idea to the community when he became superintendent. According to board president Larry Aikman, "A lot of misinformation got out. People got up in arms. 'They're trying to kill the school.' 'They're going to make a private school out of us.' 'They're going to make us wear uniforms.'"

According to O'Reilly and Aikman, the proposal to apply for a charter led to the largest community meeting ever held. Approximately 150 people were present.

Under the charter school law in Arkansas, 80 percent of a school district's teachers and administrators and 75 percent of the parents must approve a charter before the district can seek state approval. Because of the conflict in the community, the district invited all those eligible to vote on the issue. After the community meeting, over 90 percent of the adult residents voted for the charter. O'Reilly said, "We passed all of those hurdles. Everybody listened, and they overwhelmingly voted for it."

Despite the solid community support, after bringing district and community representatives before the Arkansas State Board of Education *four times*, the board voted down the charter four to three. School and community members expressed bitterness about the experience. Aikman said, "It's a sad, sad story. I get really emotional when I talk about it. The rejection, however, had its up side. Community support for the school increased, as an 'us versus them' interpretation of the rejection grew prevalent locally."

Local Definitions of Success

In keeping with our perspective that an effective rural school is responsive to local circumstances, I sought to understand the community members' expectations for their schools. I asked all persons interviewed to tell me what they thought made a good school and how the Fourche Valley High School measured up.

The residents with whom I spoke said they were pleased with their school and trusted its leaders. School staff and community members showed concern for traditional measures of student performance, but not to the detriment of a balanced program that values student morale or the skills and dispositions needed to make an isolated area home. Most people expressed satisfaction with the school, citing recent improvements in student morale and pride in the school, as well as increased adult participation in school affairs.

Parents and students spoke about the advantages of small classes, the close attention that teachers give students, and the importance of being "comfortable and safe." Several students talked about each student being able to get the kind of education he or she needed. When I asked what made a good student, they spoke about doing as well as one can, dependability, and getting along with others.

People most closely associated with the school—the board president, the district's superintendent, the school's principal—each expressed concern about high school students' performance, but they generally agreed that the best way to address the issue is through improvement of morale and school pride. Importantly, they feel that high morale and school and community pride are worthy accomplishments in themselves.

Board president Larry Aikman elaborated, "Historically, our high school . . . has not flourished like our elementary school has. But we are

addressing that in a number of ways. We recognize that for whatever reason, the school had not captured whatever it needed to capture with youngsters once they hit the 10th or 11th grade."

Aikman told about being a student himself in Fourche Valley and about returning to the area after retiring from the military.

> One of the things that disappointed me when I got on the board was the morale of the high school students. They just didn't seem to be proud of their school. I think all our elementary students have been very proud, enthusiastic, loved to come to school. That's something you can't turn around over night, but one of the things we're trying to do is keep the enthusiasm as (the students move) into the upper grades. I think through 10th grade now . . . probably 11th and 12th grade, we have made some pretty good improvement.

Superintendent Jack O'Reilly agreed with Aikman, saying, "If the kids were not enthused about the school, then it would all be a sham." Aikman continued,

> And when you get morale up and pride in school, that improves other things. One thing that I believe that we can do is improve test scores. And [we can do that] only if they want to improve their own test scores and take pride in the school and it means something to them to do that. We're the third smallest school in the state. When we start our basketball season, which lasts three months, it's going to be hard for us to ever have a winning season because most of the people we play are twice, three times the size we are. If we can win academically, that's what I want to do.

When I asked principal Cecelia Rice to define success, she said,

> I don't know if I can define it in a few words. My daughter [who was a high school junior] . . . *Academic success* is success for her. [But] for a lot of these kids, success means being able to have friends and getting along. . . . We're getting a lot of . . . students [from other schools]. They've been getting in fights—can't get along—so they're living with grandmother. And those kids do very well here. Success for those students is just not getting in trouble, getting along—their parents are . . . just wanting them to stop getting in

> trouble, not getting kicked out. You know: rules . . . [and] we're pretty strict here. If they break a rule, they know there are consequences. . . . That's just how it is. . . . We want them to understand that if you do it, you pay.

Superintendent O'Reilly listed specific features of the school's success: technological progress (increasing technology available to the staff and students), the literacy partnership with ATU, a countywide technology partnership of elementary media centers, distance learning partnerships with four neighboring districts, community support for the new baseball field and the new baseball programs for all ages, the environmental curriculum focusing on the garden and greenhouse, after-school tutoring and adult computing classes, a new parent involvement coordinator, and significant increases in parent participation.

Although school leadership, staff, and board members consistently mention high morale and pride in school and community as important, they acknowledge that test scores and dropout rates are important indicators of success. They express frustration and concern about test scores and student aspirations. When I asked O'Reilly what he thought the parents wanted, he said, "High school is the hardest to pull off. I think the problem is not a failure to get into universities. It's motivation—that's the problem."

I asked if a good student could get the education he or she needs. He told about one student who will take trigonometry next year. This will be a first for the district, and the course is offered through distance learning. The superintendent once again affirmed that the problem is expectation levels, not lack of capacity to deliver instruction. Board member Aikman said this about expectation levels:

> There's a paradox. You want your students to love where they live and you want them to stay. But if you really want to make something of yourself, you almost have to leave the area to go where the jobs are. This affects expectations. They should want to go to college, to make something of themselves above finishing school and going over to the chicken plants. You're talking about minimum wage jobs and not much potential for growth. I don't know that anybody chooses that, but it happens. A kid thinks, "My mama and dad work there and *they* are happy."

The superintendent agreed, "If it's good enough for my parents, it's good enough for me."

Both superintendent and board president agreed that the dropout rate for high school is a concern because it is a bit higher than the state average yearly rate of three percent. When asked about the reasons for dropping out, O'Reilly said,

> We have changed the academic program the last couple of years quite a bit to address deficiencies and to offer a program that captures the kids' interests and imagination. . . . There are kids who, with their families, are just going through the motions. . . . Another real problem we've been facing is that I don't think the program fits the kids. I didn't have any stock in the school district. I didn't have to cover my tracks. So we've been changing things. . . . For instance, we had no technology three years ago. Now we have more technology than anybody—maybe as good as anybody in the state as far as technological resources for kids—the ability to get to and use technology.

The School's Greatest Challenges

The most critical challenge for the residents of Fourche Valley is the lack of economic opportunity. This challenge manifests itself in the school in the form of "low aspirations." The lack of good jobs locally means that a common incentive to study hard is missing from local reality. In order to realize such incentives students must imagine life elsewhere.

The community leaders, educators, and students I interviewed acknowledged low student aspirations and a limited vision of the future as problems. School staff viewed most residents of the area as complacent about their children's school performance or at best ambivalent about the prospects of their children attaining higher educational levels.

All of those I interviewed expressed empathy for the families whose children leave the area to pursue additional education and better-paid employment. A widely held view was that students who complete postsecondary schooling run the risk of leaving the valley for good, first to attend school and then to secure good paying jobs elsewhere. Certainly, this view is distressing, especially for those local people interested in cultivating an improved academic program.

The school staff I interviewed agreed that they saw the low aspirations of students and their parents as a hindrance to improved performance. I asked the superintendent if he thought they were able to provide a good education for the students. He said, "I don't think that it's the case that the school can't meet the needs of our students who want certain things. I really think that it's the expectation level of the community."

The students I interviewed reported that most of their friends were *not* interested in leaving the area, and that they did not aspire to conventional careers that would take them away from the valley. In describing classmates, one student observed,

> Some go to college, but it's usually like a local college—like Russellville—and they come home on the weekends. Last year 12 (students) graduated, and most of them stayed here. Only one or two went to college out of last year's graduating class.

Evidence of a School Thriving in the Face of Adversity

Despite worries about students' reportedly "low" aspirations, evidence that Fourche Valley High School is thriving was ample and easy to find. I found signs in the school climate and the appearance of the facility. Teachers, staff leaders, and others spoke about their recent progress in using technology and telecommunications and their cooperative work with other small schools on instituting distance education programs. They talked about recent improvements in curriculum and professional development that were facilitating the development of "a true learning community" among teachers. The prevailing attitude suggested to me that the school was operating in a mode of continuous improvement. Both school staff and community members spoke of the increased involvement in the workings of the school not only of parents, but of other community members, as well.

School Climate

The positive climate is noticeable. This manifestation of comfort and care is difficult to simulate, as those who have visited many schools will know. Both teachers and students exhibited *unusual* friendliness and openness toward a casual visitor.

The students in this school were confident that their teachers and their principal wanted them to be there. Remarks made by a long-time consultant to the school confirmed that impression:

> The kids run up to me. They say, "Don't you have time to come to our room? We have something new we want you to see." Or, "Thank you so much for those new books you brought." One of the teachers wrote me a thank-you note that brought tears to my eyes. She wrote, "The changes that are taking place in our classrooms are so good for the children. I see it in their eyes." You know, test scores are great and we have to see those gains, but that's what really counts.

The School Facility

The school facility is modest but beautifully maintained inside and out. Community members have provided the labor for virtually all recent improvements and additions to the physical plant. This includes major projects such as renovation of the vintage gymnasium and construction of a new baseball stadium.

The school facility is an apparent source of pride in the community. And school staff members obviously revere the skills and talents of older community members, not just parents. Cecelia Rice, the school's principal, notes that the gymnasium is one of the oldest in the state, perhaps the oldest. She tells how the community recently refurbished it. (It *really is* beautiful—all bright blue and white with glossy varnished floors.)

> We repainted it last year. We reroofed it. We painted the floor. We painted the bleachers. It got a complete overhaul . . . and it looks nice! Before it looked like the oldest gym. The bleachers were all grey. It was so dark in here. We painted them white. When we have pee-wee games . . . there are 300 people here!

One of the most noticeable things about the school's interior was the brightly colored, permanent artwork, created by professional artists and students. There was also a remarkable lack of commercially produced "school-type" wall decorations so often found in U.S. schools. Both teachers and principal gave much credit for the school's attractiveness to the ATU consultant mentioned earlier, whose work, though

focused on the school's language arts program and adult literacy programs, has broadly influenced the instructional ethos schoolwide.

Telecommunications

The school had made significant progress in technology access and use in the three years previous to my visit. All students have computers in their classrooms, and a computer lab in the library is available for classes of students and adults. The school has constructed an interactive-television classroom and is involved in a distance learning partnership with three other school districts. The four districts are sharing teachers for low-incidence classes such as foreign language and higher-level mathematics. Principal Rice noted,

> Next year we'll be exchanging 10 classes with three other schools. This is just among us [public schools], and no university is involved. . . . For example, *we* have a Spanish teacher and we'll be sending [that is, delivering] classes to two other schools.

Through distance education partnerships, school staff members have begun to realize better ways to serve the needs of unusual students. Superintendent O'Reilly feels that distance education partnerships are critical to the school's capacity to meet the needs of all students. He told about one of their most promising students:

> This one youngster is a smart boy, and next year he's going to be a senior. *Never* in the past could we offer trigonometry. We didn't have someone to teach it. Next year, another district is sending us trigonometry classes for that student and someone else. Well, this is an example of what we're able to do now that we weren't able to do several years ago.

Curriculum and Instruction

Recent improvements to the school's instructional program have centered on the language arts program in all grades, but effects were felt throughout the curriculum. Relevance in curriculum was mentioned frequently by all those interviewed. The principal described it as "a curriculum in tune with the daily lives of students." The school has recently added an environmental studies curriculum and is reinstating a previously abandoned music program.

The school has a large garden, which the fifth and sixth grade students maintain. The vegetables they grow are used in the cafeteria. The principal told about how the year before the students even planted cotton: "They did cotton as a unit, and the kids were just fascinated when it opened. They were looking for someone in the community—just anyone—who could spin cotton, but I don't think they have found anyone yet."

Children were working in the garden. All of them were very friendly, inquisitive, and unusually forthright—absolutely confident that I would be interested in what they were doing. I was introduced as "Miss Pat." The principal asked, "What are you planting?" They shouted in unison, "strawberries and broccoli!" That day they were also planting beans to accompany their carrots, red onions, and watermelons.

The principal and I walked over to a small shed to see the new baby chicks, and she explained, "We just got them last week; they mail them to you. But we had to keep them in the school at first because we had an electric short in the shed. We just got it fixed, and so now they're out here." She asked the teacher what she was going to do with the chickens when they got big. "Are you going to give them to the kids?" she asked.

The teacher said, "We haven't thought that far. We might want to keep them. That's our pen. The kids built this pen. They put the wire around the front." We played with the chicks for a while and the teacher added, "We have to find a way to keep the varmints out."

Pointing out a greenhouse, Rice said, "We got a Wal-Mart grant for that. The kids will start houseplants and bedding plants, like tomatoes, and then we'll sell them to people. We also have some herbs. We don't lock the greenhouse, which is a statement about where we live."

Professional Development and Teacher Learning Community

Improvement of curriculum and instruction are also being addressed through uncommon professional development strategies. For example, one of the high school teachers visited Japan on a fellowship won by the school. Japanese-style artwork created by the students is on display in the school. The teacher had learned the techniques in Japan and had taught them to the children.

Leadership, staff, and consultant spoke of the need to affirm a sense of place while at the same time avoiding parochialism. There is a

conscious effort to professionalize the teaching staff. In talking about professional development and program improvement, one staff member spoke about the overall approach in the following terms:

> We've tried not to say, "OK, we are going to cut dropout rates, we're going to get test scores higher, and we're going to do this in two easy workshops." . . . We are approaching it very slowly, step by step, and (trying) to be sure we understand what we're doing . . . and I think it will be another year before we see a lot of gain in test scores. By the end, I think we will.

Involvement and Engagement by Parents and Community

One of the most striking first impressions of the school is the number of community adults engaged in all sorts of activities. Superintendent O'Reilly described adult involvement in the school:

> Last night we had adult computer classes in our library. The backyard was full of kids and parents for the baseball game. We also had practice for the play. There must have been 50 cars here. You don't have 50 or 60 cars around the schoolhouse when people hate the school. You got three things going on. From that standpoint, the baseball program is new, and that brought people; the computers are new, and that brought people; and the play is new, and that brought people. We didn't use to have plays. That's what I meant by change in the program to capture the kids' interests and to fit their needs more, and I think we're doing that. Is it perfect? No. Is the high school as strong as the elementary school and middle school? No. But it's getting stronger. [Although] high school is the hardest to pull off . . . it is a good measure of the health of the whole school operation.

The school is making concerted efforts to increase the engagement of parents and other community members in the education program, both as supporters of instruction for the children and as active learners themselves. The school has employed a parent involvement coordinator. Adults may attend computer classes. Parents also participated in corrective reading techniques provided by ATU for the school's faculty.

The school is the major—the only—significant source of community entertainment, and staff take this responsibility to heart. On the

day of my visit, in the auditorium, students and teachers in costume were involved in a dress rehearsal for a play that was to be performed for the community in a few days. The stage set looked to me like a professional set designer had created it. The play was advertised in the school newspaper.

School staff have recognized that the person they hired as parent involvement coordinator has tremendous leadership ability, so faculty members are doing all they can to help her realize her capabilities to the fullest. One staff person described some of their efforts:

> She's going with us on some of our school observations. The sole purpose is to see the parent center that they've set up, and I thought this will be a great [opportunity]—even though it's a large community—that's OK. We can see what a really good parent center looks like, and we can take it from there.

Is This School Flourishing?

It appears to me that the primary force behind this school's success is its leadership. I saw leaders who are trusted, leaders who care, leaders who have high expectations, leaders who have seen "what *good* looks like" in schools, leaders who have a broader sense of community, and who know how to network and find resources. These leaders know how to work with others outside the community to obtain additional resources. They know how to develop coalitions to move the community, and how to align community members behind a cause. The charter school movement may have "failed," but it was *successful* in galvanizing community members to work for their school community. Failure isn't usually an absolute setback; from a different perspective, it is most often a step toward success.

Leadership is a curiously dynamic phenomenon, certainly. It requires people who are willing to take responsibility for initiating action, but it also requires people who are willing to vest their trust in "leaders," a trust that can easily be withheld or withdrawn. In talking to the board president and superintendent about this, I said, "Maybe you were lucky." They both replied, "Of course! It's the environment."

The superintendent said, "They would like for us to shine in as many ways as possible."

Larry Aikman said, "Basically, we have the capability to be the best

school. We may *already* be the best in the county. I'm very proud of our little school."

The Superintendent

As noted previously, the superintendent was an outsider and most definitely an urbanite. But he has become an insider, first, by virtue of being married to a native, and second, by his obvious concern for the welfare of both the school and the valley as a whole. He and the school principal seem to have worked out a very effective division of responsibilities. His most important contribution seems to be broadening the community through networking, both with other small school districts and with external agencies willing to provide resources for the school. He is excellent at the art of grantmanship. Although the focus of his energies is outside the community, he maintains good relationships with school staff and community members.

When describing O'Reilly's leadership, board president Aikman said, "The superintendent isn't kidding when he says he has an open-door policy when somebody wants to talk. [However], we try to get people to go through channels—start with teachers and so forth." O'Reilly had been superintendent for four years at the time of the site visit. One staff member said, "Well, he's developing a great track record so we're probably going to lose him." Aikman said, "We're lucky to have had him as long as we have."

The School Principal

Cecelia Rice is truly an extraordinary school principal. It is difficult to imagine many people who could handle the job of both elementary and high school principal with such grace and finesse. Like her father, board president Aikman, and Superintendent O'Reilly, she has the advantage of being an insider in the community with a wider perspective that comes from having lived and worked in other places. She handles virtually all internal school affairs, many that might be handled by a school superintendent elsewhere. Understanding her contributions requires that one acknowledge her high energy and commitment. In addition to her duties as principal of essentially two schools, *she teaches two classes daily and adult computer classes in the evening!* Rice's

principalship looks very different from principalships in most U.S. schools.

The Board President

All districts should be blessed with a person with the experience, wisdom, and energy that Larry Aikman brings to his role as board president. There was no hint of the tendency, which one sometimes finds in rural or small-town boards, to "micro-manage" administration and teaching. Aikman described himself and his role with characteristic humility: "Well, I'm retired from the Army. I'm a crusty old colonel who does manual labor now."

O'Reilly said about Aikman, "He went away for 30 years and then came back. So we're talking about a wealth of experience outside the realm of the valley."

Aikman's personal interest in the valley and his advocacy efforts are a strong and positive influence. His work extends well beyond that of serving as president of the school board. His insights into the value of rural America and his advocacy efforts could serve the interests of all rural schools. In a letter published in the Little Rock *Democratic Gazette* (paraphrased below), he asked a pointed question that can be applied to rural America in general:

> Do the people in the State of Arkansas have an obligation to send money to rural areas where it is not feasible for the kids to go to school somewhere else? We cover 250 square miles. That is a big area. Neighboring schools are over an hour from here. Some of our kids get on the bus at 6:10 a.m. already. So the question is, "What are we contributing to the rest of Arkansas that should make them feel a little bit of an obligation to support us?" Well, where does the timber come from? You can stand out here any day of the week and see log truck after log truck go by. Where are they going? Most are going to another saw mill. Saw mill workers there are working with materials that the wood from our area created the jobs for. So they make a buck. Now how many times does a dollar change hands? Seven times, isn't it? That's generally what they figure.

The School-University Partnership

Fourche Valley has established a long-term partnership with Arkansas Tech University. ATU is a regional comprehensive state university, founded in 1909 to serve the rural northwest quadrant of Arkansas. The people served by ATU are mostly from rural areas. Today ATU enrolls approximately 4,700 students in 44 programs of study at the associate, baccalaureate, and master's levels.

The purpose of the FVSD-ATU partnership is to improve literacy in the valley. Through its ongoing relationship with ATU, the school has been able to improve its language arts program and, more generally, to sponsor an ethos of concerted instructional improvement.

The strength and quality of this school-university partnership cannot be separated from the personal leadership of the primary university consultant to FVSD. Her assistance and insight are valuable resources in the Fourche Valley School. Again, we see a person who not only has professional expertise, but who has the cultural values essential to maintaining productive relationships among the faculty of the Fourche Valley School and the communities it serves (and the community it *constitutes*).

A Positive Effect of State Standards

In describing the teaching staff at Fourche Valley School, Superintendent O'Reilly said,

> One thing that is special about this school is the fact that we have been able to hire a much higher grade of candidates, including Mrs. Rice. They are of a much higher caliber talent-wise, ability-wise, than they had four years ago when I first got here. That's all I can say. We're able to attract pretty good candidates.

Rice said, "Five years ago, our pay wasn't competitive. So [in recruiting new teachers] we were asking people to move to nowhere *and* take less money. But now we're very competitive: we have small classes, we have technology, so we're getting good ones." This change did not happen solely because of local initiative. Aikman observed, "That [salary improvement] was forced on us, by the way. They established at

the last legislative sessions that we pay a minimum salary."

I asked, "So did you have to tax the people here, or did you get more funds from the state?" O'Reilly said,

> It was a combination of things. We got more from the state. We've been able to spend some grant money on some stuff, which saves our other money. So we've done it three or four different ways. It's helped us quite a bit. The state says you have to spend this much money, and they are essentially trying to force some schools out of business. It's not the fact that the teachers don't deserve it. But we all knew that was the motivation behind the bill. They were able to raise the salary $10,000 in three years. Sometimes state standards can be positive forces. When the district had to comply, the community found ways to make it happen.

Discussion

I would call what I saw at FVSD a state of "tenuous sustainability." The school has the characteristics to flourish and thrive, but the school district's continued survival depends on the continuing economic viability of the valley. And the existence of the school depends on the district's ability to hold the state's advocates of consolidation at bay. The school and community reportedly battle state pressure to consolidate because, community members told me, consolidation would seriously injure, if not demolish, the sense of common purpose that the school engenders in the valley. At the same time, valley residents and educators work hard to provide schooling that is responsive to community needs and relevant to the lives of both children and adults.

If the district enjoyed the wholehearted support of the state instead of encountering its continual resistance, could they do more? Or is the state's resistance like the wind against the wings of Immanuel Kant's dove—a negative force that actually encourages and enables the school district and its community to fly? Reality is not simple, and outcomes have multiple causes. Not all the intended causes are productive, nor do all the seemingly counterproductive measures yield counterproductive results in the end.

There is surely a place for educational standards. But the simplistic approach of directly or indirectly threatening some small schools with

closure as a supposed route to fiscal efficiency has long been discredited, as has the argument that larger school size consistently improves the quality of education. In fact, there is much information to suggest an inverse relationship between size and quality of education where impoverished communities are concerned.

The district's continued viability appears to depend on either keeping the current leaders or finding new ones who will continue the work already begun and who possess strengths and abilities similar to those of the present leaders. Still, there is a palpably tenuous feeling about the current leadership. For example, rumors circulated that the superintendent might leave for work in a larger district. Also, while I believe the university's influence will remain a legacy for some time, were the ATU literacy consultant to discontinue her work at FVSD, the district would have to find a replacement to resume these critical efforts. Perhaps I sell the community short. Perhaps new strengths would emerge in any case. The community members have certainly demonstrated their ability to assemble and support their current leaders.

So much depends on economic development in the area that one wonders if the school can do all that it seems it must. If there were a chamber of commerce with the dynamic and caring leadership exhibited in the school, might it improve conditions in the local economy? What improvements would serve the community best? It is not easy to say.

At the very least, the people of Fourche Valley should not have to justify constantly the existence of their community while simultaneously seeking to improve their conditions. Fourche Valley residents should be confident that the state and our society value their small community. As a nation, surely we do not want to engineer a country of densely populated metropolitan centers surrounded by near wastelands in which healthy communities are not sustainable.

Conclusion

This study raises the question of suitable expectations for a school situated in a geographically isolated community, a community that is unwilling or unable to incorporate in order to provide services and leadership separate from the school. In the case of Fourche Valley, the school is more than a school building or even a "learning community."

In its operation, it reconstitutes the several communities of the valley into one larger (though still small!) community.

The school, however, cannot continue to exist if these small communities cannot remain viable. The district (the territory and communities enclosed by the FVSD) requires locally appropriate economic development. According to the theories of Cornelia and Jan Flora and those of Robert Putnam, the FVSD exhibits both social capital and features of "entrepreneurial community." These features attest to an already existing potential for economic development. If state education policy encouraged and supported the combination of school program development and community economic development, the district would more easily fulfill its apparent mission as an organizing force in the valley.

Notes

1. This case study was conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory as part of the Laboratory Network Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Dr. Hadden is now an educational consultant in Austin, Texas.
2. The school's address is Briggsville, approximately 40 miles southwest of I-40 from Russelville. Briggsville is 53 miles east of the Oklahoma border.
3. See, for example, J. Sher, ed., *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of the Conventional Wisdom* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977).
4. J. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980).
5. The National Center for Education Statistics, *Common Core of Data (CCD): School Years 1993-94 through 1997-98* (CD-ROM; NCES 2000-370). (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2000), reports that of the 70 students enrolled in grades 7-12 of Fourche Valley High School in 1997-98, 66 were non-Hispanic Whites and 4 were Hispanics.
6. A number of well-known rural writers now advise able rural youngsters *against* pursuing higher education. Gene Logsdon, for instance, in his popular book *The Contrary Farmer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 1993, p. 25) writes, "If your goal is cottage farm contentment, *some of the most unnecessary money you can spend is for a college degree* (Logsdon's emphasis)." Logsdon is leader of the small-farm movement in the United States and has written about farming for decades.
7. The editors have honored the consultant's request to remain anonymous throughout this chapter.
8. In many rural districts around the nation, in the editors' experience, the state department of education is regarded first, as ignorant of rural conditions, and second, as careless about its expectations for policy implementation in rural areas.

Rural districts, in our experience, voice concerns that are similar to those of city districts but generally lack the political influence to press their points very strongly either at the state department of education or in the legislature. This observation may help explain why state equity suits (a judicial rather than legislative strategy) have so often originated with coalitions of rural districts.

9. See M. Raywid, *Current Literature on Small Schools* (ERIC Digest) (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1999), ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 425 049, for the most recent review of related literature.

10. C. B. Flora and J. L. Flora, "Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure: A Necessary Ingredient," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 529: 48-58 (1993); and R. D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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